

Why “Presbyterian”?

The term “Presbyterian” refers to a representative style of church government. Each congregation elects elders from among its members. The elders, together with ministers of Word and Sacrament, are called *presbyters* (derived from a Greek word for “elder”).

Presbyters form the local governing body of each congregation, called the Session; they also govern through regional bodies called Presbyteries and Synods, and the national governing body, the General Assembly. Presbyterian simply means “government by presbyters”.

How Do I Join First Presbyterian?

Faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is the sole entrance criterion. As expressions of that faith, baptism, public profession of faith, and the declaration of intent to support the work and worship of the church are the only requirements for membership in the P.C.(U.S.A.).

Baptism is also administered to the children of believers, who have the status of “baptized members” until their confirmation.

Confirmed members may be received by the Session in one of three ways:

Profession of faith;
Reaffirmation of faith;
Transfer of membership from another Christian church.

New member classes are offered periodically.

Church Government

A major contributor to the reformed theology was John Calvin, who converted from Roman Catholicism after training for the priesthood and the law. While in exile in Geneva, Switzerland, Calvin developed the presbyterian pattern of church government, which vests governing authority primarily in elected

laypersons known as elders. The word presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elder.

Elders are chosen by the people. Together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, they exercise leadership, government, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a particular church as well as the church at large, including ecumenical relationships. They shall serve faithfully as members of the Session. When elected as commissioners to higher governing bodies, elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and they are eligible for any office. (Book of Order G-10.0102 and G-6.0302)

The body of elders elected to govern a particular congregation is called a Session. They are elected by the congregation and in one sense are representatives of the other members of the congregation. On the other hand, their primary charge is to seek to discover and represent the will of Christ as they govern. Presbyterian elders are both elected and ordained. Through ordination they are officially set apart for service. They retain their ordination beyond their term in office. Ministers who serve the congregation are also part of the Session. The Session is the smallest, most local governing body. The other governing bodies are Presbyteries, which are composed of several churches; Synods, which are composed of several presbyteries; and the General Assembly, which represents the entire denomination. Elders and ministers who serve on these governing bodies are also called presbyters.

Who Receives Baptism?

Baptism is administered to all those whom God calls. Since the initiative lies with God, and since, in any case, we need the Holy Spirit's help to respond to God's call, the key factor in Baptism is not the age or maturity of the person being baptized, but rather the church's corporate response in claiming the promises sealed in the sacrament. Both parents and the congregation are part of that corporate response.

In the case of those who have reached the "age of discretion," and are able to claim for themselves the promises of grace, Baptism is the seal of their discipleship and the sign of their entry into the covenant community. In the

case of children or infants, who, of course, are unable to claim God's promises for themselves, their parents or guardians respond on their behalf.

Whether the person baptized is an adult or a child, the congregation also makes its promise to nurture the baptized person in the faith. The vow of the local congregation, which represents the church universal, is an important aspect of the Baptismal rite. Presbyterians do not practice "private Baptism."

Modes of Baptism

Since there is only one Baptism, those baptized in the name of the Trinity in any Christian denomination are not re-baptized in our church. Although we usually administer the water by pouring, Presbyterians recognize – indeed practice – Baptism by sprinkling and by immersion. We do not, however, rank one mode of administering the water over another.